

## Online Series

2024. 01. 08. | CO 24-03

# Background and Implications of Kim, Jong-un's Letter of Condolence to Japan for the Earthquake

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On January 5<sup>th</sup>, North Korea, in the name of 'Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim, Jong-un,' sent a letter of condolence to 'Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan' regarding the damages caused by the earthquake on the Noto Peninsula that occurred on January 1<sup>st</sup>). In the letter, Chairman Kim mentioned, "To you and through you (Prime Minister Kishida), I extend my deepest condolences and sympathy to the bereaved families and victims," expressing wishes for a swift recovery from the damages. This move by North Korea occurred amid conducting three consecutive days of artillery drills threatening South Korea along the Northwest coast.

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<sup>1)</sup> As mentioned by one commentator, it is challenging to definitively ascertain why North Korea sent this letter of condolence four days after the earthquake. It appears that internally, they needed time to conduct a review, including the decision to send the letter. If the letter had been sent immediately after the earthquake, there would have been a more positive response within Japan.

## Background on Kim, Jong-un's Letter of Condolence

North Korea's humanitarian letter to Japan is unusual in several ways and raises questions regarding its background. First, it is unusual for North Korea, a country that has hostile relations with Japan, to send a letter of condolence in response to natural disasters such as earthquakes. North Korea, in its year-end announcement of the results of the General Assembly of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party, criticized Japan as a "running dog" and "faithful stooge" of the US policies toward North Korea, condemning it within the context of the trilateral cooperation system involving South Korea, the US, and Japan. Therefore, the background behind their move to send a letter of condolence to the Prime Minister of Japan sparks interest and draws attention.

Second, the significance of the letter of condolence is heightened by the fact that both the sender, Supreme Leader Kim, Jong-un, and the recipient, Prime Minister Kishida, are the highest-ranking leaders in their respective countries. While North Korea has sent letters of condolence to Japan in response to major natural disasters on several occasions in the past, this marks the first instance where both the sender and recipient are the highest-ranking leaders in North Korea and Japan, respectively. Notably, this has occurred under the regime of Kim, Jong-un.

Third, the content of this letter is very brief and does not touch upon any other issues other than expressing sympathy for the earthquake damages in Japan. Despite its simplicity, considering the two aspects mentioned above, one might interpret this as North Korea's willingness to initiate a dialogue and contact Japan. In a press conference on the 6<sup>th</sup> by Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, the Japanese government mentioned Chairman Kim, Jong-un's message as one of the condolence messages from around the world and said, "We would like to express our gratitude." Minister Hayashi stated, "There is no recent incident where the Supreme Leader of North Korea sent a condolence message to the Japanese Prime Minister regarding an earthquake, including the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake<sup>2)</sup>." Minister Hayashi

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<sup>2)</sup> During the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Kim, Yong-nam, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, sent a condolence message to the General Association of

mentioned, “We are not responding to the messages from leaders around the world at this time” because we are tending to other pressing matters. This statement implies that when the situation stabilizes, including recovery progress, the Prime Minister of Japan may send an appropriate form of response to North Korea.

### Intentions of North Korea

So, what could be the intentions behind Chairman Kim, Jong-un personally sending a letter of condolence to the Prime Minister of Japan? Considering the occurrence of Kim, Jong-un's letter to Kishida coinciding with North Korea's coastal artillery drills, it can be seen as a part of the ‘Communicate with Japan and Block South Korea (Tongil-bongnam)’ tactic. By doing so, North Korea may aim to undermine the cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan toward North Korea. North Korea itself emphasizes the growing solidarity among these nations as the most significant security threat, providing grounds for such interpretations.

On the other hand, one can interpret North Korea's actions as an attempt to provoke the Kishida administration, which is struggling with a low approval rating, and to express its intention to pursue a dialogue between North Korea and Japan, using humanitarian issues as a pretext. The Kishida administration, with its approval rating dropping below 20% at the end of last year, finds itself in need of a turnaround strategy. While North Korea self-assessed that it achieved 103% of its grain production target at the end of last year, international standards indicate that approximately 40% of the population cannot sustain a regular diet. In this context, to encourage residents to achieve goals in the five-year economic development plan, North Korea needs to garner economic support from external sources. In this regard, establishing a foundation to secure future humanitarian aid from Japan, a key member of the international community's sanctions regime against North Korea, can be viewed as

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Korean Residents (Chongryon) in Japan. Additionally, during the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, Prime Minister Kang, Song-san, sent a condolence message and a donation of \$200,000 to Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama of Japan.

an appropriate action. Of course, questions may arise regarding North Korea's volition in dialogue, as there have been no gestures beyond the letter of condolence to Japan, such as sending even a small amount of relief goods or implementing measures such as halting the coastal artillery drills in the West Sea.

The decision by Kim, Jong-un to send a letter of condolence might also have taken into consideration the fact that the Kishida Cabinet has left the door open for dialogue with North Korea to resolve the abduction issue. In fact, in the first half of last year, there were reports in the Japanese media that Japan and North Korea had two private contacts in a third country. In this context, it can be said that Kim, Jong-un's decision to send a letter of condolence for earthquake damages to Kishida reflects North Korea's firm intention to pursue dialogue or contact regarding humanitarian issues. At the end of last year, North Korea, in presenting its policy directions for the new year, mentioned its foreign policies, stating, "We must write the history of the diplomacy of the Republic that befits the status of a powerful nation based on the principles of safeguarding the dignity of the Party, enhancing national power, and protecting national interests." If Prime Minister Kishida responds to Kim, Jong-un's letter of condolence and resumes the humanitarian dialogue, it would mark a smooth start for North Korea in implementing the aforementioned foreign policies. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Minister Hayashi stated, "Regarding the dialogue between Japan and North Korea, we will refrain from responding, including providing a response to this message (Kim, Jong-un's letter of condolence), considering the nature of the matter." This statement leaves room for thought.

## Policy Implications

The challenge lies in South Korea's response to North Korea's approach, aiming to weaken the framework of South Korea-US-Japan sanctions on North Korea and isolate South Korea in the name of humanitarian issues. Japan, as an extension of its distinctive pragmatic diplomacy, engaged in a series of contact to improve relations with North Korea in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and again in the late 1990s. In particular, during the period of the end of the Cold War, Japan's interactions with North Korea lacked coordination with the South Korean government and did not

progress harmoniously alongside inter-Korean dialogues, which became a diplomatic issue between South Korea and Japan. Based on a reassessment of this history, there is a need for closer cooperation between Korea (the US) and Japan on policies toward North Korea.

Given the lack of progress in North Korea's denuclearization, the question of whether and how to respond to North Korea on humanitarian issues has emerged as a priority between South Korea and Japan. The humanitarian issues, even within the context of sanctions against North Korea, may be addressed through exemptions granted by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718 Committee or through confidential dialogues among relevant countries. Considering the potential negotiating tactics of North Korea, which may approach the abduction issue through steps such as fact-checking, exchange of letters, or reciprocal visits, South Korea should explore joint responses with Japan while also preparing for an inter-Korean humanitarian dialogue.

This year, South Korea, the US, and Japan may face challenges cooperating in maintaining consistency in their policies toward North Korea due to significant domestic political events that are scheduled or anticipated. Therefore, the three countries need to strengthen policy coordination not only through high-level meetings, but also by actively engaging in trilateral working-level consultations on key issues, including North Korea's nuclear programs and humanitarian issues. In the same context, policy consultations among experts of the three countries and efforts to spread consensus among the citizens of the three countries regarding shared policies are also emerging as crucial tasks. ©KINU 2024

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